

# Horizontal Inequalities and Violent Conflict in Pakistan: Is There a Link?

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This article is an attempt to trace the socio-economic origins of the recent growth of religious militancy and violent conflict in Pakistan. In particular, it examines this important subject in the light of a significant thesis advanced by Frances Stewart that it is “horizontal inequalities” and “failure of the social contract” between the State and the citizens that lie at the heart of most violent conflicts across the developing world.

Like many other developing countries, the landscape of Pakistan's history is also marked by conflicts of multiple sorts and nature. These vary from the ethnic conflict in metropolitan Karachi to insurgency in Balochistan and random incidences of sectarian violence elsewhere in the country. In recent years however, Pakistan has seen an unprecedented growth of religious militancy particularly in its north-western territory and the related incidents of terrorism across the country. This is seen by many as posing a serious threat to the peace and security of not only the people of Pakistan but of the entire region and of the world at large.

The government of Pakistan, in the aftermath of the incidents of 11 September 2001, became a key ally of the United States (US) in its “war against terrorism” and began taking military actions against these militant groups and their suspected hideouts in north-western Pakistan including the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). The key pretext of this “war against terrorism” is based on the premise that most incidents of terrorism across the world have linkages to Al Qaida and Taliban that have their geographical basis in these areas.

Given the significance of this war and its expected repercussions on the peace and stability of the region and that of the world at large, it is important to study the key drivers of radicalisation and religious militancy in Pakistan and to formulate a comprehensive strategy that is based upon a holistic assessment of the root causes of what is referred to as the growing “Talibanisation” in Pakistan. To this end, systematic studies that investigate all dimensions – political, ideological as well as socio-economic – of the origin and growth of religious extremism in Pakistan are absolutely crucial to determine whether military action alone is enough or

interventions of another nature are also required to curb this menace in the long run.

While recognising the role of international politics and geostrategic factors in understanding the root causes of militancy in Pakistan, the present study goes beyond these political explanations and traces the socio-economic origins of violent conflict and its growth in Pakistan. In particular, it presents evidence on how socio-economic deprivation, horizontal inequalities and the weakening of social contract between the State and the citizens may have contributed in terms of mobilising support for religious militancy and radicalisation in Pakistan. The article highlights the need to conduct further empirical work to examine, in a more systematic manner, the link between socio-economic factors and violent conflict in Pakistan.

**Root Causes:** Most academic studies conducted so far, to examine the root causes of radicalisation and “Talibanisation” in Pakistan, have approached the subject from a political and sociological angle. Many of these studies (see e.g., Abbas 2004) suggest that the formation of the Taliban as a violent group can be traced back to the cold war era when this political force, known as “Afghan mujahideen” at that time, was mobilised by the US and Pakistan to fight against the Russian invasion of Afghanistan. This view is consistent with the argument that identity particularly the one that is associated with ethnicity or even a particular religious ideology is not “primordial”. It is sometimes socially constructed and manifested in order to achieve a particular political or economic objective (Nafziger and Auvinen 2002). The groups are mobilised primarily by raising their ethnic or religious consciousness. This is the view advanced by instrumentalists who see ethnicity and religion being used as a tool to achieve political and economic objectives.

Another popular and important explanation of the growth of radicalisation in Pakistan is the systematic right wing orientation of the society that was achieved deliberately during “Zia era” (1977-87) through a number of legal and administrative policy measures (see e.g., Aftab 2008). Many analysts argue however, that despite the gradual radicalisation of

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Pakistan's society and body politic during the Zia era and afterwards, the radical elements in the society did not indulge in violent activities of the sort witnessed today that includes suicide bombings at public as well as private places on a frequent basis. Moreover, the level of organisation that these violent groups have achieved today – as reflected by the establishment of parallel systems of government on a vast array of state territory – is also unprecedented in the history of this country. Many analysts argue that the seeds of this “violent” radicalisation were sown right after the government of Pakistan became a key ally of the US in its “war against terrorism”. In this sense, the growing radicalisation of Pakistan's society is seen by many as a reaction to western imperialism that continues to date in one form or the other. There is yet another small group of “liberals” in Pakistan who view the present growth of radicalisation in Pakistan in isolation with the geostrategic and political conditions and maintain that this radical religious group known as “Taliban” is striving to gain religious hegemony by imposing its particular religious ideology on the rest of the population.

Observations such as these that trace the political and ideological roots of radicalisation are nevertheless critical to understand the formation of radical militant groups in Pakistan. Yet they offer only a partial explanation of the recent growth of religious militancy and violent conflict in Pakistan. There are important socio-economic factors that must also be analysed in order to address the root causes of growing radicalisation in the context of Pakistani society. This paper is an attempt to approach this critical subject through the lens of a development economist and to highlight some of the important socio-economic factors that underlie violent conflict and the growth of religious militancy in Pakistan.

**Deprivation and Violent Conflict**

While studying the causes and consequences of internal conflicts across the developing world, development economists often attribute the roots of these violent conflicts to the economic and political exclusion of certain population groups and their socio-economic deprivation. Frances

Stewart of Oxford University (Stewart 2002a, b) for instance, provides anecdotal as well as empirical evidence to show that it is the “horizontal inequalities” that lie at the heart of most violent conflicts across the developing world.

Horizontal inequalities as defined by Stewart are inequalities – that may be measured across various dimensions such as economic, political and social – between culturally defined groups. These groups may be defined on the basis of geographical affiliation, gender, religion, class, caste or language, etc. This is different from vertical inequality that measures inequality between individuals irrespective of their affiliation with a particular group. According to this view, imbalanced development that involves sharp horizontal inequalities (group differences) is an important cause of conflict across the developing world. These horizontal inequalities may have many dimensions including economic, social and political. For instance, it might be the case that some groups are marginalised in economic and/or political terms and they may use violence as a tool to seek redress of their political and economic grievances.

Stewart also links the root causes of conflict in some of the developing countries to the failure of social contract (Stewart 2002b). According to this hypothesis, the relationship between state and the citizens is based upon a social contract in which citizens accept state authority so long as it provides public services and reasonable economic conditions. A worsening of economic conditions and the breakdown of social services may result in conflict. Let us examine Pakistan's case in the light of this theoretical framework.

**Horizontal Inequalities and Violent Conflict:**

During the past one decade or so, there has been an evidence of growing polarisation in Pakistan between the “haves” and the “have-nots”. Despite a reasonable level of overall economic growth and the subsequent reduction in poverty on average, inequality as measured by the Gini coefficient has been on rise (Figure 1).

Regional inequality in terms of both income as well as non-income dimensions is particularly striking not only across rural and urban areas but also across provinces and across districts of the same province. Table 1 shows some development indicators

**Table 1: Selected Development Indicators for Pakistan, NWFP and FATA (1998)**

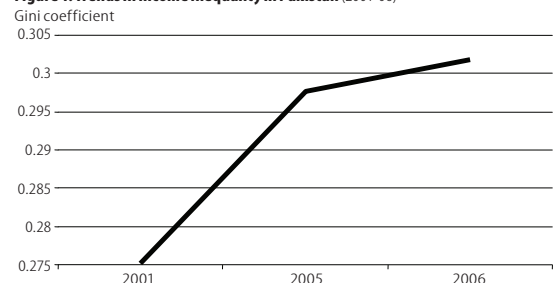
Indicator	Pakistan	NWFP	FATA
Literacy ratio (both sexes, %)	43.92	35.41	17.42
Male literacy ratio (%)	54.81	51.39	29.51
Female literacy ratio (%)	32.02	18.82	3.00
Population per doctor	1,226	4,916	7,670
Population per bed in health institutions	1,341	1,594	2,179
Roads (per sq km)	0.26	0.13	0.17

Source: Government of Pakistan, www.fata.gov.pk

of FATA, one of the most conflict prone areas at present and its comparison with the provincial as well as the national average. The table shows that there is a stark difference between the human development indicators in FATA and the national average. Male literacy ratio in FATA is one-half of that of the national average whereas female literacy rate is a staggering 3% compared to the national average of 32%. Population per doctor is also in stark contrast to the national average (7,670 versus 1,226 at the national level).

Official estimates on the spatial distribution of poverty are almost non-existent despite the fact that the government does conduct household income and expenditure survey at the provincial as well as the district level on a regular basis. The data is not readily available for the purpose of research, yet a few studies conducted by independent researchers and organisations reveal that poverty in Pakistan has a high degree of regional concentration (SPDC 2007). The province of Punjab, for instance, is the most prosperous province, yet within Punjab, there is a marked difference between the northern and the southern districts. Poverty is mostly acute

**Figure 1: Trends in Income Inequality in Pakistan (2001-06)**



Source: Government of Pakistan, 2008.

and its incidence is much higher in southern Punjab (Table 2).

**Table 2: The Incidence of Poverty in Punjab, Pakistan by District (2004-05)**

Southern Districts	Percentage of Population Below the Poverty Line	Northern Districts	Percentage of Population Below the Poverty Line
Rahimyar Khan	45.87	Rawalpindi	11.32
Bahawalpur	39.46	Attock	14.11
Rajanpur	54.16	Chakwal	18.09
Dera Ghazi Khan	51.01	Sialkot	13.96
Muzaffargarh	56.29	Jhelum	12.32
Multan	38.40	Gujarat	12.72
Lodhran	48.37	Sargodha	25.66
Bahawalnagar	32.45	Narowal	19.30
Vihari	30.03	Gujranwala	19.04
Khanewal	38.84	Lahore	11.60
Layyah	40.86	Sheikhpura	26.20

Source: SPDC (2007).

In some of the southern districts such as the district of Rajanpur, Muzaffargarh, Dera Ghazi Khan and Bahawalpur, the incidence of poverty is even higher than the districts of rural Sindh that are often counted amongst the most impoverished areas of Pakistan. Interestingly, these are the very districts that also happen to be the “fertile recruiting ground”, as one study by Ahmed (2008) puts it, for groups that are involved in suicide bombings in Pakistan. The same study reveals that many of the seminaries established during the days of state-sponsored jihad in Afghanistan were set up in southern Punjab. The Bahawalpur district alone has around 638 registered seminaries apart from hundreds of unregistered ones. Jaish-e-Mohammad, a militant group founded by Maulana Masood Azhar, has its strongest presence in the southern districts of Bahawalpur, Bahawalnagar, Layyah, Bhakkar and Rahimyar Khan. Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan, according to this study, dominates in Muzaffargarh and Multan that are again amongst the poorest districts of southern Punjab.

Table 2 shows striking difference between the incidence of poverty in the southern and northern districts of Punjab. It does not appear to be a coincidence, therefore, that radicalisation and militancy is gaining faster support in south of Punjab where poverty is rampant and illiteracy and unemployment is high leading to relatively greater potential of unemployed and frustrated youth providing support to the militant activities. This is an important hypothesis that needs to be tested in a more rigorous and a systematic manner.

The concentration of political and economic power is yet another striking feature of Pakistan. One aspect of this concentration is evident from the absence of a comprehensive land reforms programme throughout its history. The pattern of land ownership is highly inequitable with the top 2.5% of the households owning over 40% of the total cultivated area whereas half of all rural households have no access to land (Gazdar 2003). One may argue that such conditions prevail in other developing countries, yet not all of these countries are confronted by violent conflict. In this perspective, it is important to understand that in the present case of Pakistan, socio-economic deprivation and inequality may not be the root cause per say as in a standard “cause” and “effect” type of a framework, yet many of these deprivations and socio-economic injustices may very well fuel these conflicts and result in a further growth of radicalisation. Interestingly a recent article in the *New York Times* (Perlez and Shah 2009) suggests that the Taliban in Pakistan are in fact engineering a class revolt by exploiting the deep divide between a small group of wealthy landlords and their landless tenants.

The socio-economic deprivation of majority of the population is evident from the global ranking of Pakistan that remains low and in some cases even below that of sub-Saharan Africa. In the area of education for instance, the UNESCO (2007) reveals that Pakistan contain one of the highest number of out of schoolchildren in the world. Education of course comes later in terms of priorities when the immediate survival of the people is under threat. A great majority of the population in the country is still struggling to have access to some of the basic necessities for their survival such as access to clean drinking water and sanitation. Around 60% of the population in Pakistan does not have access to improved sanitation. Access to basic health facilities is also extremely low. In the absence of any social security arrangements, the bulk of Pakistan's population remains vulnerable to disease, illiteracy, poverty, and economic shocks. Many of these vulnerabilities serve as a breeding ground for terrorism for many of the country's poorly educated and unemployed youth.

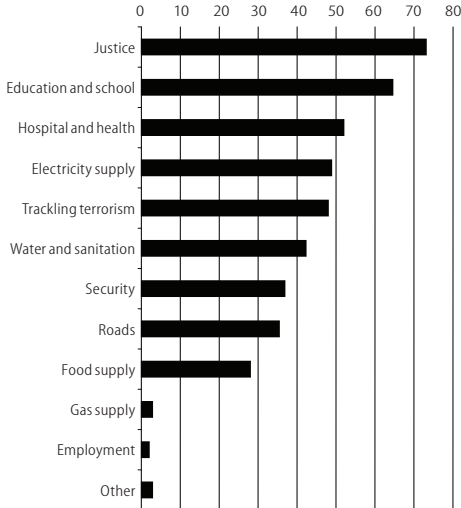
**Failure of Social Contract:** As discussed earlier, the relationship between the citizens and state is based upon a social contract in which citizens accept state authority so long as it provides public services and reasonable economic conditions. When the state fails to provide adequate social services to its vast majority of the population, the result is growing deprivation of the ordinary people and the emergence of non-state actors that try to exploit the vulnerabilities of people and fill in the gaps that are supposed to be addressed by the state.

For the purposes of present analysis, it is instructive to highlight two major failures of governance in Pakistan that seem to have a direct relationship with the mobilisation of support for radicalisation and militancy. One is the failure of state in providing quality education to a great majority of its people in an equitable manner. Over the years, the state is seen as abdicating its role in favour of the private sector in the provision of education. This has resulted in a visible deterioration in the quality of public education on the one hand and private sector education remaining expensive and unaffordable particularly for low income groups, on the other. This gap that is left by the state in the provision of affordable education to all and other safety nets is filled partly by the madrasa education. Clearly, the majority, if not all, of the students who opt for madrasas are the ones who are too poor to afford basic food, shelter and clothing let alone education. The madrasas provide them with free food, shelter and clothing apart from giving them some religious education. To a large extent therefore, it is the gap in public provision of quality education and other safety nets that these madrasas have filled.

Another gap left by the State with reference to its potential relationship with the present crisis is the weak ability of the State to provide speedy justice to ordinary people at the grass roots level. Interestingly, a perceptions survey of around 2,000 adults, conducted recently by the Community Appraisal and Motivation Programme, (CAMP) in FATA reveal that an overwhelming majority (73%) of the sample population in FATA believes that the most important service that the government of Pakistan should provide in their area is “justice” followed by “education and schools” (65%).

Many analysts view the recent implementation of “Nizam-e-Adl regulation” in conflict affected districts of the North-West Frontier Province as a reflection of the failure of state to administer speedy justice to its people. Other gaps also abound, particularly with reference to the

**Figure 2: People’s Perception in FATA Regarding the Most Important Service That the GOP Should Provide in Their Region**



Source: CAMP 2008.

structure of governance which, if not addressed by the State are bound to be exploited by the non-state actors to attain their public acceptability and support. These include deficit in the ability of the State to protect the life, liberty and property of its citizen and to maintain law and order.

**Conclusions**

Violent conflict and growing religious militancy in Pakistan is a complex phenomenon with multiple roots that transcend from geostrategic factors to socio-economic deprivation, regional inequality and the failure of governance. A holistic assessment of all these factors must be taken into account while formulating an effective strategy to resist the growth of radicalisation and militancy in Pakistan. Such a strategy must not rely on military force alone but should also address the underlying conditions that continue to foster support to these radical elements. The current military action that the government of Pakistan is undertaking to tackle the problem of growing religious militancy and terrorism must be accompanied by some non-military tactics for a long-term solution to this problem.

Such a multi-pronged strategy must include at least three important components.

First, it must include an agenda of social uplift and economic inclusion of all groups and individuals. The process of economic growth that enriches few groups and regions while depriving others is bound to fuel conflict and radicalisation in the society. Adequate employment opportunities must be created for the youth so as to prevent them from becoming fodder for militancy and violent activities. The current demographic transition that Pakistan is undergoing is adding an unusually large proportion to the young population belonging to the working age group. Unless, this growing population of youth is provided adequate employment opportunities, it will continue to provide fodder to the militant activities of radical religious groups. While recognising the fundamental right of every individual to have access to basic social services such as education and basic health, steps must be taken to ensure an equitable access to opportunities to the entire population irrespective of the economic and social standing of the individuals.

Second, the concentration of economic and political power that breeds and sustains poverty and deprivation of the vast majority of the population must be resisted. An agenda of broad-based reforms that include comprehensive land reforms must be advocated and its long-term significance highlighted. Third, substantive reforms must be taken to improve the structure of governance and establish the writ of the State in a universal manner. Popular movements such as the recent lawyers’ movement in

Pakistan that reflect the aspirations of the Pakistani people to attain the rule of law and the supremacy of judiciary should transcend beyond the restoration of the chief justice (that was nevertheless important as it symbolises the supremacy of judiciary as an institution) towards bringing about broad-based governance reforms at the grass roots level that includes speedy justice to the ordinary people.

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